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Reagan sends Laxalt to Manila with message

By Roger Fontaine
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President Reagan has sent a special personal emissary with a private message for Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos, administration sources have told The Washington Times.

In so doing, the United States is stepping up its demonstration of concern for the future of the Philippines, which is experiencing its most serious internal unrest since the end of World War II.

The president's message will apparently be a frank assessment of the political trouble Mr. Marcos finds himself in and what that implies for United States' interests in the Philippines.

The emissary, Sen. Paul Laxalt, a Nevada Republican and a longtime close associate of the president, is going at the personal request of Mr. Reagan, the same sources said. Mr. Laxalt has performed similar missions in the past, most notably when he was sent to Taiwan in April 1984 on the eve of President Reagan's trip to the People's Republic of China.

The meeting with the Filipino leader is scheduled for Wednesday. Mr. Laxalt left for Manila from Andrews Air Force Base early Saturday.

Mr. Laxalt is scheduled to arrive in the Philippines today after a stop in Hawaii for talks with the U.S.

Commander in the Pacific, Adm. James A. Lyons. He returns to Washington Thursday night.

The trip, which is expected to be announced today at the White House, culminates a lengthy period of assessment within the administration over Mr. Marcos' prospects in an increasingly turbulent Philippines.

The exact content of the president's message was not revealed by the sources, but the meeting is expected to produce a frank discussion of Mr. Marcos' political troubles. Such a trip has been discussed for some time inside the administration, with some officials believing such a message is "overdue" because it is felt the Philippine president "is screwing things up."

There is no indication, however, that any specific demands will be made or penalties attached if they are not met.

But one indication of that rising concern is that although the president has written letters to Mr. Marcos before, Mr. Laxalt is the administration's first presidential emissary specifically sent to talk with the Philippine leader.

Earlier reports that William P. Clark, a former national security adviser, and another close political associate of Mr. Reagan, had gone to the Philippines on a similar mission were branded false by the same

administration sources.

Last May, however, CIA Director William Casey, another political ally of the president, presided over three days of meetings between U.S. and Filipino officials in Manila in order to get a fresh assessment of the

threat posed by the Marxist New People's Army. He subsequently met with Mr. Marcos to discuss the new threat estimate, while news reports at the time said Mr. Casey also urged the Filipino president to hold immediate presidential elections.

Although administration sources will not reveal whether any similar request will be made this time, the Laxalt trip evidently is meant to be a stronger signal of increasing U.S.

worry, and the personal concern of Mr. Reagan himself. The importance that the White House attaches to this visit is also underlined by the fact that Mr. Laxalt has no other planned meetings on his four-day stay in the Philippines.

The timing of the visit, these sources stressed, was not keyed to any one recent event, nor is it felt here that Mr. Marcos' troubles now are any greater than two months ago. But the Laxalt visit is a clear indication that a turning point has been reached in the Philippines, putting at risk huge U.S. interests in that archipelago.

Those interests have steadily accumulated since the islands were wrested from Spanish control at the end of the last century. Today they

include economic investments of \$3 billion and key military facilities, Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base, the principal American naval base in the Far East. They help protect vital sea lanes from a growing Soviet naval presence in the region staged from bases stretching from Vladivostok in the Soviet Union in the north, and Danang and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam to the south.

In congressional testimony earlier this year, the U.S. bases were described as "essential" by Richard L. Armitage, the Pentagon's assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs.

The Reagan administration has

also made a major effort to convince a skeptical Congress that substantially increased military aid is needed if the Marcos government is to stem the growing threat posed by the NPA, which has grown to 12,000 men in the last few years. NPA commanders euphorically predict an army of 60,000 in two more years, and threaten attacks on metropolitan Manila in the very near future.

Until very recently, the Reagan administration has shown more concern — at least publicly — about the NPA threat than Mr. Marcos has despite the Philippine president's recent hint that he may request the assistance of U.S. troops to help end the NPA insurrection.

Mr. Marcos, 67, who was first elected president in November 1965, has stayed in office since then, ruling through martial law from 1972 until 1981. Recently, he has been besieged by his political opponents in a campaign that picked up steam after the murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino. The opposition has charged the killing was carried out by the Philippine army upon Mr. Aquino's return from exile two years ago.

Despite that opposition, Mr. Marcos has already announced his plans to run for president in the 1987 elections, and has also hinted lately of an earlier, snap election — a possibility provided under the new constitution.

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